

The Maritimes-Guatemala Breaking the Silence Network

A Network Linked to the United Church, yet Independent

This article tells a little of the story of Breaking the Silence (BTS), a human rights solidarity network in the Maritimes. While Breaking the Silence is an independent network that welcomes participation from diverse backgrounds and spiritual orientations, it is rooted in the United Church, particularly through [Tatamagouche Centre](#), a United Church education centre in Tatamagouche, Nova Scotia, and through its relationship with a former United Church partner in Guatemala. Although BTS is independent of both the United Church and Tatamagouche Centre, it is profoundly shaped by its connections with the centre and the church. Conversely, BTS shapes the mission of Tatamagouche Centre and impacts the social justice work of the United Church throughout Maritime Conference.

“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together” (Australian Aboriginal activist group, 1970s). The Maritimes-Guatemala Breaking the Silence Network mission statement begins with this quote. BTS is a voluntary network of people in the Maritimes who support the efforts of Guatemalans struggling for political, social, economic, and environmental justice. Our work is guided by

- understanding that we all deserve to be treated as equals
- building long-term relationships based on solidarity and mutuality
- responding to needs and issues defined by our partners and by other Guatemalans
- recognizing that injustice is connected to structural inequalities both within and between countries
- supporting structural transformation both in Guatemala and in Canada

Our relationships are built on friendship, sharing, and dialogue as we work, learn, and grow together. Many United Church members in the Maritimes participate in Breaking the Silence and see the network as a small yet vital part of building the shalom kin(g)dom. The path has sometimes been rocky; we have sometimes been lost or confused along the way; our progress has been slow and sporadic. Yet much has been achieved.

In the 1980s, many groups in the Maritimes (including Oxfam, the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace, CUSO, Ten Days for Global Justice, and Tatamagouche Centre) felt called to support the human rights struggle in Guatemala, where the Mayan people and social activists were targets of the Guatemalan army in a genocidal conflict. In a region with limited human and financial resources, it made the most sense for these groups to work together.

The Breaking the Silence story begins in 1988 when Tatamagouche Centre made social justice programming a high priority. Kathryn Anderson joined the staff, bringing Guatemalan solidarity experience, including a connection with a United Church partner, the Kaqchikel Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church of Guatemala. The presbytery is made up of women and men of the Kaqchikel Mayan ethnic group who live in the Chimaltenango region, an area hard hit by the violence. Kaqchikel Presbytery leader Vitalino Similox and his partner, Margarita Valiente, ministered courageously to their Mayan brothers and sisters. Working along with them were Pascual Serech, Manuel Saquic, and Lucio Martinez, all church leaders who later died because of their human rights work.

Unlike most presbyteries in Canada and in Guatemala, the Kaqchikel Presbytery does not hold many meetings, although they do offer workshops on topics from political participation to micro-credit, as well as theological training for community leaders. Nor are they interested in constructing church buildings, establishing traditional worship services, or having people become Presbyterians. Instead they create opportunities for informal faith sharing and community-based self-help groups, often made up of women.

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They made no distinctions on the basis of religious affiliation. Anyone, Protestant or Catholic, who is willing to work in their communities for survival and reconstruction from the devastating social and economic impacts of the violence of the 80s, is welcomed into the life of the presbytery.

Supported by the United Church Division of World Outreach, Tatamagouche Centre decided to develop a relationship with the Kaqchikel Presbytery as well as other groups working for human rights. This first relationship and many others since that time have enabled Maritimers to deepen their own faith and commitment to social justice. Tatamagouche Centre has become a centre of solidarity and support for the Guatemalan people in their struggle, where issues in Guatemala are linked with social justice concerns in Canada.

A first step in relationship-building took place when two Mayan women from the Kaqchikel Presbytery visited the Maritimes for three weeks in 1990, speaking to churches, community groups, social justice networks, and anyone who would listen. Both women participated in events ranging from public speaking to demonstrating extraordinary embroidery and weaving skills to participating in a feast of lobster and wine. They shared personal stories of suffering, struggle, and courage with enormous dignity. This is how Josefina Martinez de Inay described it: "I talked with them about the strength of individuals, churches, and NGOs who were struggling in order that these *humiliations* [her emphasis] would no longer be permitted." Their visit touched many throughout the Maritimes, making Guatemala's struggles a reality.

Kaqchikel Presbytery, which continues to live the gospel with courage and tenacity, and without denominational barriers, is a perfect match for a Canadian network that is not denominationally based, yet has many United Church members, as well as members from other denominations and members with no religious affiliation whatsoever. And it has been a perfect match for Tatamagouche Centre, whose mission is to invite and challenge people from diverse backgrounds to personal wholeness, right relationships, respect for creation, and justice in the world.

The year after the women's visit to Canada, Tatamagouche Centre, with financial support from the United Church as well as Oxfam and CUSO, sent its first delegation to Guatemala. We spent several days in Chimaltenango with the Kaqchikel Presbytery. The night we stayed with displaced families remains indelible in delegation members' minds. We slept on the floor in the same rooms with malnourished, ill children whose parents had no money for food and medicine. We saw the presbytery sharing awareness and organization, education, health, and human rights advocacy with their people, particularly women in rural communities. We accompanied Josefina to groups where she connected biblical reflection with awareness of their human rights as Mayans and as women. We also met with several human rights and community development groups across Guatemala, from widows of the disappeared to groups working with street children.

We learned much from our first effort. The encounter with people whose poverty and loss was so great left some in the group overwhelmed. We did not know the Kaqchikel Presbytery, our host group, very well, nor did they know us. Misunderstandings arose. They saw us as a typical North American church group and did not understand that we were a human rights delegation. They felt they should show us the more "churchy" aspects of their work and were reticent about explaining their work in communities and the depth of their commitment to the struggle for justice. Time to talk things through was a luxury during that period of great danger and suffering. We muddled through, and recognized that, despite difficulties, errors, and questions, we had been privileged to meet courageous, committed church and community leaders.

That first delegation sowed seeds that bore much fruit: newspaper articles, meetings with countless churches, classes, and community groups, and the formation of the Maritimes-Guatemala Breaking the Silence Network. Within months the network had established the Atlantic Urgent Action Network.

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Twenty years later, developing long-term committed partnerships with Guatemalan church and community organizations and sending delegations to Guatemala each year is still the basis of BTS. While continuing our relationship with the Kaqchikel Presbytery, BTS has added partnerships with

- the New Hope Foundation and the Community Legal Clinic in Rabinal
- the Highlands Committee of Small Farmers (CCDA)
- HIJOS (Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice, Against Forgetting)

We continue to send delegations each year in collaboration with Tatamagouche Centre. These delegations always include United Church members, often active leaders in their congregations, presbyteries, and Maritime Conference. Since 2001 we have placed more than 50 young adults with our partner organizations, funded by the Canadian International Development Agency Youth Internship Program.

We have worked with Just Us! Fair Trade Coffee Roasters Cooperative to develop the Breaking the Silence brand of coffee, using coffee beans purchased from CCDA members. This project has involved many United Church congregations across Maritime Conference, offering a great opportunity for education in economic justice.

We have created a Mining the Connections campaign, an education and advocacy campaign that supports Guatemalan communities negatively impacted by Canadian mining companies. As a result, the Maritime Conference Church in Action Committee has also developed a Mining the Connections Committee and educational kit.

In 2007 United Church BTS members named some significant experiences and themes coming out of the BTS experience:

- the strength of faith among Guatemalans we met
- the presence of so much hope in transformation for the future despite the terrible past
- security in community, not in government
- the closeness to the earth among Guatemalans and less consumerism, which is unlike our access to mobility and money that we count on for survival
- coming face to face with our privilege and realizing that our affluence is the flip side of their poverty
- we can no longer say “we don’t/didn’t know”; the responsibility to let others know
- the personal nature of the experience—meeting and sharing face to face enables us to continue our work in Canada

The Maritimes-Guatemala Breaking the Silence Network offers a model that builds on United Church relationships and values, yet is free to move in creative and inclusive ways.

Kathryn Anderson

*See the [Breaking the Silence](#) or the [Tatamagouche Centre](#) websites for more information. For an in-depth understanding of *Breaking the Silence* and of solidarity, you may wish to read Kathryn Anderson’s book, *Weaving Relationships: Canada-Guatemala Solidarity* (Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2003). Available in many community and university libraries across Canada.*